

# The Grace of Neighborhood Baseball Parks

## Guidelines for Urban Baseball after the Era of Cheap Petroleum

BY PHILIP BESS

**In our suburban sprawl we have built a generation of “stadiums on steroids” to fund the runaway economics of professional baseball. How can we return to building neighborhood ballparks, from the big leagues down to Little League, which are centers of community life?**

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**A** *Prefatory Note:* Professional baseball is not a charity. Indeed, not only is professional baseball not a charity, it is a billion dollar industry that has not hesitated to throw its weight around in local politics at both major league and minor league levels to gain public subsidies for new stadium construction. Whether and how much tax money should help pay for new sports stadia is a political argument best argued locally; but with respect to the quality and character of the new stadia themselves, the fact that two Major League Baseball teams—the Boston Red Sox and the Chicago Cubs—provide clear evidence that it is possible to be both profitable in small neighborhood ballparks *and* to be good neighbors is (alas) insufficient to turn today’s suburban culture, culture of baseball, and culture of architecture away from the current paradigm of stadium construction not inaptly called “stadiums on steroids.” That paradigm routinely results in new baseball stadiums on average some fifty to seventy-five percent larger in both interior square footage and building footprint area than the exceptionally profitable Fenway Park and Wrigley Field (see opposite page), which opened in 1912 and 1914 respectively. From unscientific observation, the current operative rule seems to be that every team building a new stadium—especially in big market cities—wants all the bells and whistles of the most recently built stadium; plus ten percent more area “for comfort;” plus an illusory allusion to some local historic predecessor (for confirmation of



Above: *FENWAY PARK AND ENVIRONS*. Boston, Massachusetts. Photo: © Philip Bess, 2003. Used by permission.

Below: *WRIGLEY FIELD AND ENVIRONS*. Chicago, Illinois. Photo: © Philip Bess, 2008. Used by permission.

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this, see the plans for the new stadia that will replace Yankee Stadium and Shea Stadium respectively); plus all the government subsidy that it can negotiate. So let it be acknowledged at the beginning that the current model of stadium construction is unlikely to change unless and until economic and political circumstances dictate a change. That said, a change in economic and political circumstances is not inconceivable, particularly if we

are at or are soon approaching worldwide Peak Oil. Being neither an economist nor a geologist, I have no way of knowing (other than observing the rising price of crude oil) whether Peak Oil is on the immediate horizon or perhaps even here; but four-dollars-per-gallon gas is already having measurable effects upon American driving habits. When the price of gas gets to six dollars per gallon at the pump the American suburban lifestyle is in big trouble, and at eight dollars per gallon it is probably over; and the commercial aviation industry is in for some big changes as well. The effects of this shock to the national and global economy will entail social changes far more significant than changes in how we build baseball parks; but it is unlikely that the construction of baseball parks will be unaffected.

Consider what follows therefore as ideas to file away until needed.



How *ought* we to think about cities and baseball parks — of their nature and purpose, and of our nature and purpose? Gilbert Chesterton once wrote that out of the preponderance of evidence that led him to believe that the orthodox Christian story is true, perhaps the most basic is that Christianity precisely illuminated why he was correct in feeling simultaneously both at home and uncomfortable in the world; for in the Christian view, both the world and our selves are (in this order) *good, fallen* (i.e., in a state of disorder such that on our own we are incapable of fulfilling the purpose for which we have been created), and *redeemable and perfectible through the agency of divine grace*.

I mention these fundamental Christian truths because what is true of life is true of baseball; and although the flaws of America are many, there is something essentially right about a culture that can produce a thing so fundamentally good as the game of baseball. Though, as is evident to anyone who has been paying attention, baseball at its highest levels is also vulnerable to the flaws of the American culture that invented it and in which (its growing worldwide popularity notwithstanding) baseball remains embedded. There is indeed a fundamental goodness — a goodness both democratic and meritocratic — to baseball, a game that can be played well by persons of virtually any body type, and that also requires the most careful balance between both highly visible individual responsibility and achievement, and the communal purposes of a team.<sup>1</sup> A complex economy that allows good baseball players to both devote themselves to baseball full time and to make a handsome living doing so creates both opportunities and incentive for good baseball players to become better and to achieve excellence. So let me here acknowledge with gratitude that the professionalization of baseball is unquestionably related to the high level of excellence that today characterizes the sport.

And yet, not all is well today either with America or with baseball at its highest levels. Founding American ideals of ordered liberty and equality of opportunity are mocked by our rampant consumerism and individualism at home, and by our mindless imposition of these latter vices abroad in the name of our allegedly most blessed way of life. We have become a therapeutic culture that values celebrity and privilege over virtue; and this is reflected in the recent state of our National Pastime. This is so most famously in the steroid scandal of the past ten years, in the course of which Major League Baseball (MLB) turned a blind eye to the use of performance enhancing drugs, a fateful disinterest motivated in part (it must be recalled) by a desire to revive baseball's popularity in the aftermath of years of unjust and ruinous labor relations that entailed among other things: racial segregation until 1947; baseball's notorious "reserve clause" that bound players to the team that signed them for a year after their previous contract had expired; the 1970s rise of the Major League Baseball Players Association, arbitration, and free agency; collusion on the part of wealthy team owners in the mid-1980s; and four work stoppages in twenty-two years, including an August 1994 season-ending strike by the then arguably equally wealthy players.

It is against both this background of baseball's economic history and the post-1945 suburbanization of America (of which I will say more below) that one has to understand not only the past twenty years of new baseball stadium design and financing, but also the last fifty years of stadium design and construction, which has entailed *two full generations* of baseball stadia.

Where the multi-purpose publicly-financed stadiums-and-parking-lots of the 1960s were driven by suburbanization, the new publicly-financed baseball-only stadiums from the 1990s have been driven above all by the recent economic history of the baseball industry. Beginning with Chicago's New

Comiskey Park (which opened in 1991, and is now U.S. Cellular Field), the new stadium construction of the past twenty years must be understood above all else as prompted by Major League Baseball's need to identify and create new sources of revenue to meet rising player salaries; and to this

day — though increased revenues from television, merchandising and naming rights have temporarily outpaced the rise in player salaries — Major League Baseball (unlike the National Football League and the National Basketball Association, whose players and owners have agreed to both salary caps and revenue sharing) has yet to find a legal way to bring player salaries under control. And though some will no doubt argue that in a free

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market there is no need for MLB salaries to be “under control,” among the historic consequences of that lack of the baseball industry’s self control has been the public funding – often under duress – of new baseball stadiums.

Suffice it to say therefore that professional baseball as it operates today is problematic. Nevertheless, here I am going to argue that baseball remains an intrinsically good thing; and that baseball’s intrinsic and self-evident goodness is *best* when it occurs within the confines of an enclosed park in a traditional city neighborhood.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, although baseball is *not* religion, like all complex and intense play it is what sociologist and theologian Peter Berger has termed a “signal of transcendence.” In all kinds of play, if only for a while, we step out of ordinary time and into eternity – at the very least into an altered sense of time, but sometimes into a genuinely blessed state of timelessness. It is this transcendent dimension of all play, including baseball, which makes us care about our games – even makes us willing to sacrifice for them, often at the expense of prudential and pragmatic judgments. Play is an antechamber to the sacred; and being in the presence of Sacred Mystery is ultimately what all of us really want, and where we want to be.



So, the past two decades have witnessed a boom in new, allegedly traditional, stadium construction. Nevertheless, the baseball parks built in the first two decades of the early twentieth century were manifestly superior to the new downtown stadiums of the past two decades; not in every detail, but rather and primarily because the old ballparks were located in city neighborhoods.<sup>3</sup> The older ballparks were part of and manifested an urban culture, in which cities were first and foremost places to live, places where even persons who were not rich could live well. The cities of this traditional urban culture included within pedestrian proximity residences and businesses, schools and churches, recreations and entertainments; and ballparks were buildings designed in and at least partly for these traditional city neighborhoods.

America since 1945 has become a suburban culture. Like most of my generation, I grew up in a suburban environment; and, as they say, some of my best friends continue to live in post-WWII suburbs. But without wishing to suggest the moral superiority of city dwellers over suburbanites (or vice versa), I do say two things about post-war suburban sprawl: first, that sprawl is *the* foremost physical manifestation of our individualist culture; and second, that suburbia is a cultural conspiracy catering to an illusion – the illusion that unpleasantness in life can be avoided. In the second half of the twentieth century, the power and appeal of this illusion drained many cities of their middle class residents; and one consequence of this is that for the past twenty years many cities have been trying – foolishly, desperately, mistakenly – not to become good places to live but rather to remake them-

selves as entertainment zones. The generation of downtown baseball stadiums that have been built since the early 1990s are prominent elements of this strategy, and are best understood less as places for baseball than as expensive government-subsidized-and-sponsored architectural instruments to help baseball teams separate suburbanites from their money.

For some twenty-five years, and more than a little quixotically, I have used baseball parks to illustrate an argument on behalf of traditional architecture and urbanism. The argument goes something like this: the primary symbolic import of architecture is not as an emblem of its *time* or its *structural honesty*, but rather as a symbol of its commissioning institution; and ultimately, of the *legitimate authority* of the community represented by that institution. I have looked at ballpark design as an example of this once intuitively understood but now largely forgotten sensibility because there truly is – still – a *community of baseball* of which baseball parks are and remain tangible architectural symbols. Nevertheless, the community of *professional* baseball is now in my opinion every bit as disarrayed as the community of architecture; and stadiums have become weapons wielded by the professional sports industry to extort state and local governments, acts justified by both the sports industry and public agencies by appeals to what remains of this communal sensibility about and affection for baseball and other sports.

That is the bad news. The good news is that to the extent that stadiums such as Baltimore's Camden Yards, Cleveland's Jacobs (now Progressive) Field, Denver's Coors Field, San Francisco's PacBell (now AT&T) Park, and Pittsburgh's PNC Park are located in urban rather than suburban locations, this is an improvement over the generation of stadia that were built in the 1960s and 70s. But there are two huge differences between the former and

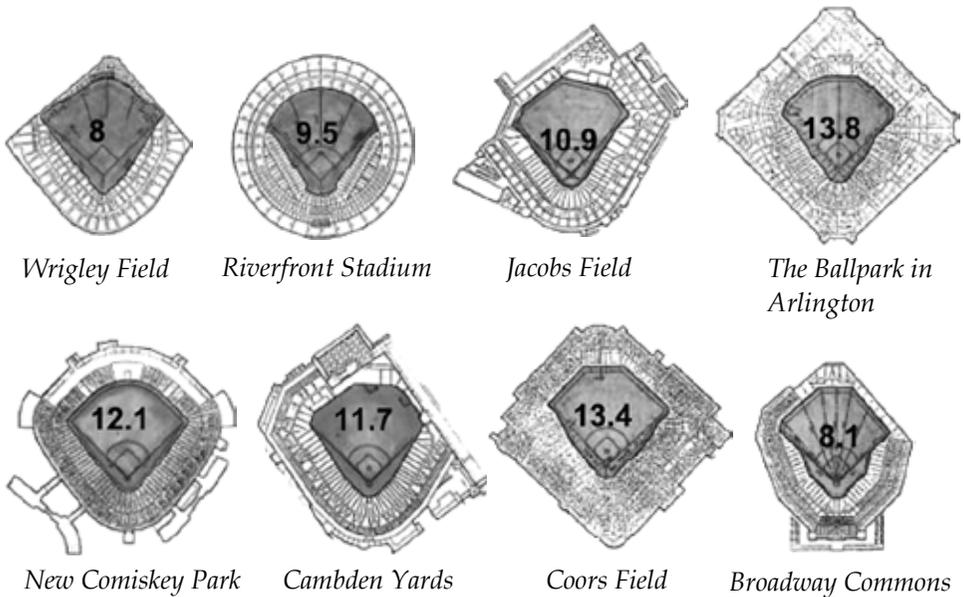
the ballparks such as Wrigley Field and Fenway Park that they are supposedly emulating. First, Wrigley and Fenway are both much smaller in scale (and hence more intimate) than the newest generation of urban stadia (see p. 34). Second (and more importantly), Wrigley and Fenway are located in traditional *mixed-*

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*use neighborhoods*, whereas many of the new downtown stadia are typically located where they are so as to be a destination component of a downtown *entertainment zone*. In other words, the former were (and are) components of traditional cities. The latter still reflect the suburban cultural bias that cities are good places in which to be entertained, but only poor people and childless adults would actually live there. But I take it as evidence of the



#### COMPARATIVE BALLPARK FOOTPRINTS

From Top Left: Wrigley Field, Chicago, Illinois (1914), 8.0 acres; Riverfront Stadium, Cincinnati, Ohio (1970), 9.5 acres; Jacobs Field, Cleveland, Ohio (1994), 10.9 acres; The Ballpark in Arlington, Arlington, Texas (1994), 13.8 acres; New Comiskey Park, Chicago, Illinois (1991), 12.1 acres; Camden Yards, Baltimore, Maryland (1992), 11.7 acres; Coors Field, Denver, Colorado (1995), 13.4 acres; Broadway Commons, Cincinnati, Ohio (unbuilt), 8.1 acres.

continuing vitality of traditional urbanism that Fenway and Wrigley arguably remain the two most popular venues not only in baseball but in all of professional sports, and the value of residential and commercial real estate in their immediately adjacent neighborhoods is very high and continues to appreciate.<sup>4</sup>



How then would we build professional baseball parks if we were to do so sanely? Here I take no doctrinaire position on whether they would be publicly financed or privately financed, which is properly a prudential judgment to be made by local communities; rather only that they would be traditionally urban in character, and part of the physical form of community embodied in traditional towns and urban neighborhoods, *which have always entailed a mix of private and public funding for important community institutions*. My only doctrinaire position here is formal: that first and foremost, we would cease looking at ballparks in isolation and instead look at them as a component of mixed-use traditional neighborhoods.<sup>5</sup> We would do this because there is a historic reciprocity between good city neighborhoods and

good baseball parks, and therefore this reciprocity should be normative. But to speak normatively about cities and about baseball parks implies that we understand what cities and baseball parks both *are* and are *for*, as well as their essential characteristics. No doubt most of us have at least some unarticulated sense of what cities and baseball parks are for, but it may be that many of us have never thought about either of these particular subjects in a systematic way. Here then is a brief characterization of good traditional towns and city neighborhoods, followed by some suggestions for how to make ballparks in an urban neighborhood context.<sup>6</sup>

Cities and towns are cooperative human enterprises and artifacts that exist to promote the best life possible for their citizens, and the fundamental unit of town planning and urban design is the neighborhood. The moral, economic, and environmental benefits of traditional neighborhoods are greatly influenced by certain formal features that accommodate cars but are nevertheless designed primarily for *the walking human being*. Good neighborhoods exhibit most or all of the following ten characteristics, which may also be regarded as guiding principles for good neighborhood planning.

*A good neighborhood has a discernible center*—usually a main street and sometimes a public square—typically bordered by buildings containing shops, offices, or residences, and sometimes civic buildings (see the final characteristic below). A transit stop (in small towns usually a bus) should be located in or along this center, with stops occurring not more than one-half mile apart.

*A good neighborhood is pedestrian friendly*, and accommodates not only automobile drivers but also those who choose to walk or who are unable to drive. Most of the residences in the neighborhood are within a five-to-ten minute (one-quarter to one-half mile) walk of the neighborhood center.

*A good neighborhood has a variety of dwelling types*. In addition to detached single-family houses, these may also include row-houses, flats, apartment buildings, coach houses, or flats-above-stores. The consequence is that the young and the old, singles and families, the working classes and the wealthy, can all find places to live. Small ancillary buildings are typically permitted and encouraged within the back yard of each lot. These small buildings may be used for parking, as one rental unit of housing, or as a place to work.

*A good neighborhood has stores and offices located at or near its center*. These stores should be sufficiently varied to supply the weekly needs of a household.

*A good neighborhood has an elementary school to which most young children can walk*. This walking distance generally should not be greater than one mile.

*A good neighborhood has small parks and other recreation facilities dispersed throughout*. These generally should be located not less than one-quarter mile or greater than one mile apart.

*A good neighborhood has small blocks with a network of through streets.* This network would include major and minor streets, commercial and residential streets, arterial and local streets; but is emphatically *not* a system of feeder roads and dead end *culs de sac*. This network provides multiple routes to various neighborhood destinations and *helps disperse traffic congestion*. Streets within the neighborhood have curbs and sidewalks, are relatively narrow, and are lined with trees. Such arrangements slow down traffic and create an environment well suited for pedestrians as well as moving and parked cars.

*A good neighborhood places its buildings close to the street.* This creates a strong sense of the neighborhood's center and streets as places, and of the neighborhood itself as a place.

*A good neighborhood utilizes its streets for parking.* Parking lots and garages rarely front the streets, and are typically relegated to the rear of buildings, accessed where possible by lanes or alleys.

*A good neighborhood reserves prominent sites for civic buildings and community monuments.* Buildings for religion, government, education, the fine arts, and sports are sited either at the end of important streets' vistas or fronting a public plaza or square.

Presuming therefore the existence or creation of a traditional neighborhood environment as the most desirable context for baseball parks, I offer the following eight imperatives for new ballpark design and construction, applicable from the scale of the Major Leagues to the Minor Leagues to Little League (see p. 37):

*Think always of ballpark design in the context of urban design.*

*Think always in terms of mixed-use neighborhood rather than entertainment zone or cultural district.*

*Let the site as much as the program drive the ballpark design — not exclusively, but more than is usually done.*

*Treat the ballpark as a civic building warranting appropriate architectural attention and embellishment.*

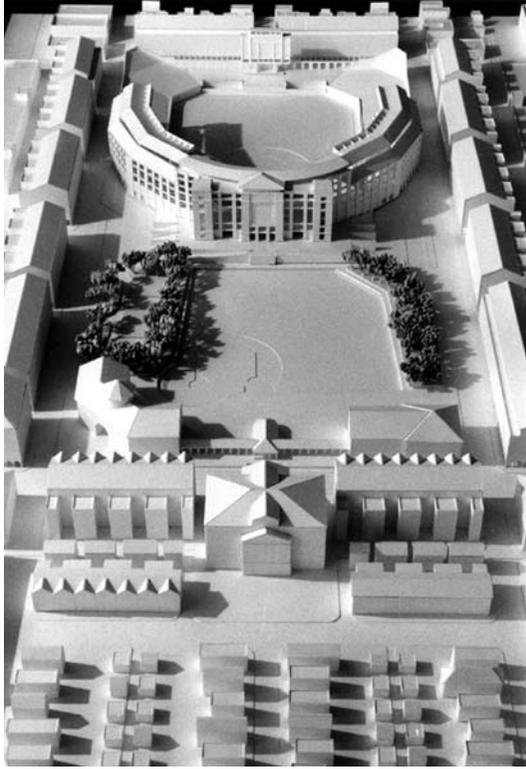
*Make cars adapt to the culture and physical form of the neighborhood instead of the neighborhood adapting to the cars.*

*Maximize the use of pre-existing on- and off-street parking, and distribute rather than concentrate any new required parking.*

*Create development opportunities for a variety of activities in the vicinity of the ballpark, including housing and shopping.*

*Keep the ballpark footprint smaller and more neighborhood-friendly by locating non-ballpark specific program functions in buildings located adjacent to rather than within the ballpark.*

No one knows just how much longer either baseball or modern society can sustain the paradigm of infinite growth. In nature, rather than growing forever to colossal proportions, living things tend to grow to a certain mature size and then re-produce. But as we wait to learn the fate of the par-



*Above: ARMOUR FIELD (UNBUILT COUNTERPROPOSAL TO THE NEW COMISKEY PARK). Chicago, Illinois. Photo: © Philip Bess, 1987. Used by permission.*

*Below: NEIGHBORHOOD BASEBALL PARK IN BAYVIEW, MICHIGAN. Photo: © Philip Bess. Used by permission.*

adigm of infinite growth, let us not forget our most basic cultural pleasures and what we already know from long human experience. So to any reader here inclined, I encourage you to cultivate the local flame of baseball. Play ball with your children; help coach their youth baseball teams; teach them how to score a game in the stands or from the airwaves; teach them to appreciate baseball excellence both achieved and observed. And when you get the chance, take them to baseball's great places and hope that the magic is working.

And here I will end with a brief story, one that has recurred in essentially the same form many times during the past quarter century that I have lived in and near Chicago. A friend came to visit me from out of town, and we arrived early to see a night game at Wrigley from my regular upper deck behind-home-plate cheap seats. The weather was warm, the ivy on the wall was green, the active twilight sky was purple and orange and pink, Lake Michigan visible to the east was turning a steely gray, the grills were fired up on the rooftops across the street, the el-train would clatter past every five minutes or so, the teams were just about to begin play, and the ballpark and the neighborhood were working together like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. And my friend, taking it all in, turned to me after a long silence and said, simply: "This is perfect."

So it was and is and at God's pleasure shall be, world without end.

## NOTES

1 An appreciation of baseball's fundamental goodness and excellence in playing it was the true (though ultimately unheeded) intuition of 1960s student radical Ted Gold, who alleged that he could never become a true revolutionary so long as Willie Mays continued to play professional baseball. Alas, in 1970—three years before Willie Mays' retirement—Gold died in a Greenwich Village townhouse when a bomb being made by two of his associates in the Weatherman faction of the Columbia Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) accidentally exploded.

2 The relationship of baseball to its landscape is a subject I discuss and illustrate at greater depth in *City Baseball Magic* (St. Paul, MN: Knothole Press, 1999) and in chapter one of *Inland Architecture: Subterranean Essays on Moral Order and Formal Order in Chicago* (Oxford, OH: Interlalia/Design Books, 2000); but in spite of the truth and romance of great pitchers who grew up as farm boys throwing baseballs against the side of a barn, baseball in both its origins and evolution is essentially a traditional, as opposed to a modernist, urban game.

3 I develop this argument concisely in a September 15, 1998 ESPN on-line essay "The Old Ballparks Were Better" (available on-line at [www.thursdayassociates.net/Texts/oldballparks.html](http://www.thursdayassociates.net/Texts/oldballparks.html)) that gives fifty reasons why the old neighborhood ballparks were superior to their new downtown counterparts.

4 This underscores another reality, which is that *prima facie*—i.e., not factoring in items such as transportation costs—good urban neighborhoods are expensive; and the main reason for that is because people like living in them. One way to make traditional urbanism less expensive is to make it less rare.

5 Against the proposition that choosing between traditional neighborhood form and post-1945 sprawl is *itself* a matter of prudential judgment, see "The Polis and Natural Law," chapter IX in my *Till We Have Built Jerusalem: Architecture, Urbanism, and the Sacred*

(Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007), 157-188. There I argue at length that the cultural habit of post-1945 sprawl, like the twentieth-century novelty of totalitarianism, sharply limits the choices available to individuals; but that this no more allows for a moral equivalence between post-1945 sprawl and traditional neighborhoods than between totalitarianism and subsidiarity.

6 These “Ten Principles for Good Neighborhood Planning” are variations and developments of traditional urban design and town planning ideas most recently re-popularized and articulated by the Congress for New Urbanism (CNU).

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